Richard Batterham — Country Potter

The first time I visited Richard Batterham and saw his pottery in the Dorset village of Durweston, was twenty years ago: the pottery had recently been built opposite the house and the three-chamber oil-fired climbing kiln (with a final fourth chamber for biscuit) was yielding what have become characteristic Batterham pots: that is a range of pieces, intended for use in the home, of high-fired reduced stonewares, thrown and turned on the wheel. The glazes are mostly matt or semi-matt celadons some derived from simple combinations of wood ash and clay, which during the firing become a part of the surface of the clay rather than form an obscuring coat. The glazes, quiet and understated, have the effect of adding subtle colour often with iron specs, which enhance and reveal form. Decoration, usually by incising or faceting is minimal.

Visiting the pottery today reveals deep and subtle rather than spectacular changes: forms have clarified, new ones have been added in particular a range of tall footed bowls based on the chalices; more than ever there is a sense of total conviction in the pots themselves, in the way they are made and sold, and the purpose for which they are intended. Outwardly the pottery remains much as before; the spaces are crowded with pots, large jars three foot tall stand waiting to be fired, glazed pieces wait to be sorted and ground, there are orders to be collected and finished pots are displayed on shelves for customers to browse at leisure. The kiln dominates, its rounded roof and its chambers rise confident and majestically, surrounded by assorted kiln shelves, props and the paraphernalia of the oil firing. The original kiln was based on the usual Korean climbing kiln he was familiar with from the one built in the 1920s by Bernard Leach at St. Ives; since then it has been enlarged and each chamber some 4’ 6” tall and over 6’ wide on the inside accommodates the output of this prolific potter. Its four to six firings a year well suits his working pace.

Though clearly in the tradition of the country potter, Batterham is not a traditional potter; his pots are too much rooted in our own times, and while they call on a wide range of historical references, they are completely ‘modern’ in feel, reflecting the complexities of contemporary life rather than an imagined rural idyll. There is a minimum of equipment and a determination to prepare clays by the long slow wet method rather than take any short cuts. A major nod towards mechanical help is the use of oil to fire the kiln and the electric blunger and pugmill.

In many aspects his method of working reflects those experienced during his period of
Ceramic Series

18 months spent as an apprentice at the Leach Pottery. Byrantson School he learnt pottery from the sculptor Donald Potter, not as a craft based art, but as a aspect of sculpture, making pots but with no production concerns. An early interest in becoming a gardener was abandoned and pottery took its place — if I became a gardener I knew I would be unlikely to make pots; whereas if I became a potter I could also be a good gardener" said Batterham.

At the Leach pottery, with the two or three other apprentices, amongst whom was Atsuya, son of Hamada there was little direct teaching; this came more from observation and absorption; already able to throw a bit, he made some of the easier shapes of the Leach Standard Ware on the kick wheel and helped to do all the jobs in the pottery. From St. Ives with his wife Dineh, who was also at the pottery, he moved to Dunweston, two miles from Blandford Forum to set up his own pottery. He got a local carpenter to build his wheel which was based on the Japanese model he had seen and liked used by Atsuya at St. Ives. Like a continental wheel this is kicked on the fly wheel, but is "suspended" on a stationary spindle, and has no water tray. Having learnt to throw the English way on a side-kick wheel and with plenty of water, his techniques had to be rethought and the making process re-learnt. It could be that this economic use of energy and limited use of slurry to lubricate the clay extended into his pots, their direct and uncomplicated shapes have an uncluttered boldness and clarity, with little fuss. The same wheel, carefully tended and repaired is still in use today and sits alongside a smaller version used in the past by his children. Wooden batts are used for the larger pots, and enable the throwing level to be heightened on a clay chuck for large wide bowls. In the throwing room a large dish, some 30" across, sits propped on a shelf against the wall. It is something of a 'trophy' (or it is cracked) being thrown from 35lbs. of clay — no mean feat on a modest sized kick wheel, but clear in concept and handsome in the deceptive simplicity of its form. It is a pot Batterham preferred to keep rather than sell as a second.

A strong sense of rhythm pervades the workshop and the pots, which extends into the life of the potter. The clay, a blend of two ball clays and a small quantity of feldspar, is mixed wet in the blunger, put in outdoor troughs to become plastic, put through the pug and then stored. The longer it is kept the better it gets. Old clay is pugged with new and the mix 'like sherry' gets better and better all the time. Experiments with porcelain pieces shown in his recent exhibition at Contemporary Applied Arts yielded a refinement of forms with no iron speckling: these Batterham enjoyed but is not yet committed to. To mix the porcelain he would not, he insisted, use a commercial blend the machinery must be thoroughly cleaned and is, he said, quite a performance. For the saltglazed pots, for which he built a small down draught kiln, the regular stoneware body can be used. An iron-bearing slip gives a particularly successful rich, orange-brown colour.

Several weeks of throwing are followed by biscuit firing, then glazing and the thirty hour firing: A pleasant, almost seasonal cycle of work develops. Experiments with different batches of wood ash, new glaze recipes and variations on familiar forms bring a continuity and strength as changes are slowly incorporated. My visit came after an unusually long fifteen week throwing period, extended from its usual twelve to meet extra orders.

Right from the start, Batterham has worked alone and this is an important part of his philosophy. All the pots are made by him: very rarely a young potter may come for short periods of a few weeks to observe, to help re-build the kiln, to sweep the floor and to deal with customers, but not to make pots. This, Batterham insists, must be his work as a potter: like pots from a good firing, they only achieve full maturity after a long period of maturation.

Outside, in the well maintained vegetable garden, there is the same sense of care, of attention to detail, of planning; a pleasing and rewarding cycle of growth and development. The half acre site provides a variety of vegetables, fruit, honey and eggs to last them more or less all year round.

To write of Batterham's pots is to write also of the potter. The cliche of the pots reflecting the character and outlook of their maker is non the less true. These are pots which brook no compromise, their strength of form and sense of domestic purpose celebrates the wheel thrown pot and the fired qualities of the clay itself. Simple incised patterns fluted decoration or cut sides gently articulate the shape. Each pot has its own subtle character though part of a large, closely related family. To have one leads to wanting others. In talking about pots Batterham reminded me of Bernard Leach's remark made when looking admiringly at a range of pots; firsts, seconds, thirds and rejects made in a pottery in Korea; his comment 'There's not a bad pot among them' can also be said of the pots of Richard Batterham.

Emmanuel Cooper
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Richard Batterham — Crochenydd Gwlad

Ugain mlynedd yn ôl oedd y tro cynraf i mi ymweld â Richard Batterham a gweld ei crochenhyn yn mhenrhaf Dwrpen ym Dorset; bryd hynny roedd y crochenhyn newydd gad ei adeiladu gyferbyn â’r ty ac roedd yr odyn ogleu uchel daid siamba (gyda phhedwaredd siamba ar gyfer tanio cychwynnol) yn cynhyrchu yr hyn a’u adeiladu bellach fel potiau Batterham nodweddidiadol; hynny yw, ystod o etemâu crochenhyn i’w cadeg wedi ei llunio ar y droiil a’u tanio ar dymndered uchel mewn awyrglych ddii-aer, ar gyfer eu defnyddio yn y centref. Llwyd-wyrdd afloyw neu fed afloyw yr y goyleddu gan amatif, rha i ohonynt wedi ei llunio o gyfuniadau syml o glas a lludw coed, ac yn ystod y tanio yr yw odyn maent yn dod yr han o awyneyb clai yn hytrach nag yn orchu arno. Efath y gwydred- dâu tawel a diffwyr yw ychwanegu liwiau cyn-
maent yn gwbl 'fodern' eu nawes ac yn adlewyrchu cymhlethodd bywyd cyfres yn hytrach na rharnant ar nwy hwydd gwledig defnyddiol. Dim ond y lleisawf o offer a didffenbyddir ac mae Baterham yn ymroddeiddir i'w syniad o beraint'r clai byr hyn ddiol gwyrau'r araf yn hytrach na defnyddio dyfisiadau i arbed amser. Y gwybodaeth daeth am ymlaen oddi ar y defnyddio o olew i dano'r oedyynw. Mae ei ddiol fel yr ymgyrchu a'i phoblogaidd i'w gwneud ar ôl yr adnodd golofn a'r cyflwyno'r gymhych wedi hyn yma.

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